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ABSTRACT

This study develops specific facts about the nature of the Black English "lingua franca" which formed on the American eastern seaboard in the last half of the eighteenth century. Accepting an assumption that American English of this period was levelling into a "koine," this investigation attempts to characterize the consonant loss and substitution within a Black English koine which emerged parallel to that in the white dialect. Evidence for the consonant phonology is taken from the dialect spoken by black characters in American plays and novels of the period 1771-1836. Next, a modelling based on the work of Turner (1949) reconstructs the possible types of consonant loss and substitution which may have been patterned upon the sound systems of those major West African languages serving as input to the emerging American Black English koine. A correlation is drawn between the rules in consonant phonology in the koine and the attitudes, generally negative, of early modern British and American Grammarians toward these types of consonant loss and substitution. Thus, whether the consonant forms had sources in West Africa languages or in early modern British and American English, the Black English koine in its earliest period was stigmatized through negative attitudes on the part of white grammarians. (Author/AMH)

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A CRUCIAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE EARLY HISTORY OF AMERICAN BLACK ENGLISH

In the 1920s, George Philip Krapp stated that the dialect we know as Black English was derived from forms that were basically "native English elements in the language."[1] His views were accepted and elaborated upon by such academics as Guy Johnson and Mason Crum, who felt that Gullah in particular was based upon a "peasant English"[2] spoken by a group of "planters, artisans, shopkeepers [and] indentured servants"[3] who were "illiterate" and "low-bred."[4] It was believed that blacks learned their English from white "unlettered bond servants,"[5] and it was this vulgar speech which may have doomed American blacks to basilect forms forever. In his study on Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect in 1949, Lorenzo Dow Turner showed that this was a gravely uninformed view, and that responsible scholarship must take into account the contributions to Gullah, and to the dialectal varieties of American Black English, of West African source languages. As is well known, Turner's insights have been developed and sharpened in recent times by such advocates of the Creolist hypothesis as William A. Stewart, Joey Lee Dillard, and many others.

In this paper, I would like to take another look at this issue in an effort first, to find out what could have been in the minds of Professors George Philip Krapp, Guy Johnson, Mason Crum, and the others whose opinions Professor Turner so stoutly contested; and second, to try to arrive at an understanding about certain of the

contributions of the languages of West Africa to the sound system of the American English Black dialect. I specifically intend to examine the evidence for consonant alternation and loss in Plantation Creole using the representations of literary dialect in plays and novels of the period from 1771 to 1836. The particular works consulted for this study are the plays "The Trial of Atticus" (1771), "The Fall of British Tyranny" (1776), "The Politicians Out-Witted" (1788), "Occurrences of the Times" (1789), "The Yorker's Stratagem" (1792), "Triumphs of Love" (1795), "Slaves in Barbary" (1797), "The Politicians" (1798), "Jonathan Postfree" (1807), and "Love and Friendship" (1809), together with the novels Modern Chivalry (1792), Female Quixotism (1801), The Spy (1820), and The Partisan Leader (1836). All of the black literary dialect from these sources will be drawn together and represented as a composite of Plantation Creole forms, and in scrutinizing that composite I hope to bring about a rapprochement between those who stress the contributions of West African languages to Black dialect, and those who cannot, in Joey Lee Dillard's phrase, lift "their eyes above East Anglia."[5] I will assume, with Dillard (1975), that there was an American koiné in the 18th century; it will be a central task in this paper to develop some idea of the way in which blacks participated in that emerging koiné, and, as well, to see the extent to which certain Black dialect features within that koiné may have been previously stigmatized as "vulgar" or "barbarous speaking" by the orthoepists writing in 17th century England.

The discussion of the facts in the early dialect representations starts with consonant alternations in stops, spirants, nasals,

and glides, and continues with examples of consonant loss, concluding with that particular consonant loss condition known as the simplification of consonant clusters. As far as consonant alternation among stops is concerned, the only changes given in the dialect spellings involve the final devoicing of /d/ in a word like "holt," and the substitution of /ǰ/ for /d/ after /n/ in "injuns." With spirants, /ð/ becomes /t/ intervocalically in "noting," but it changes to /d/ initially in "dis" and "de"--a commonly encountered substitution. The voiceless /θ/ becomes /t/ initially in "tief" and /f/ finally in words like "oaf" and "bofe." Initial /s/ is assibilated to /š/ in "shuds," and instead of /v/ we see spellings of /b/ in words like "ebery," "debil," and "bery." With sibilants, the voiceless palatal /š/ becomes /s/ initially and finally in a phrase like "was he sirt." We see an affricate rendered as /š/ in forms like "cash" and "shentilman." The representation of the "ing" ending for gerunds and participles is almost always the alveolar nasal /n/ in these spellings: "comin" and "goin" are to be found for "coming" and "going." With glides, there is an occasional prothesis of /j/ in initial position; "yi" is a spelling for "eye." There seems also to be a spirantization of /w/ in forms like "fite" for "white" and "van" for "one."

Single consonant loss is not common in the dialect spellings. With spirants, there is an intervocalic loss of /v/ in a word like "o'sur" for "overseer." In a word like "fuss" for "first," /r/ is missing in a position that can be described either as postvocalic or preconsonantal. Final /l/ disappears in a spelling like "ki'" for "kill." Examples of consonant cluster simplification, however, are

widespread in the literary dialect of this period, and the affected clusters may occur initially, medially, or finally. In the early plays the loss of initial /s/ was commonplace, so that we see spellings like "tan" for "stand," "teal" for "steal," and "top" for "stop." Medially, the /r/ and the /d/ in "children" are reduced to give "chillen."[6] In final position, /t/ is dropped after /k/, /s/, and /ks/ in words like "respec," "ghos," and "nex," /d/ is lost after /l/ and /n/ in forms like "hole" and "mine," and /t/ and then /k/ drop in a spelling like "nes" for "next." Between words, /v/ is dropped at the end of "give" when an /m/ occurs in the following word-initial position, as in "gi me" for "give me."[7]

Our understanding of these spellings must be brought up to date with the recent scholarly perspective that some of the phonological characteristics of the early Black English dialect show a substratum of African language forms. However, the evidence for the contributing rules for consonant alternation and loss from West African languages must carry an important qualification: we can speak accurately only of consonant behavior between <u>modern</u> African languages and English, for we do not have an altogether certain knowledge of the 17th and 18th century history of languages like Wolof, Mende, Akan, Ewe, Yoruba, Hausa, and Kongo.[8] Lorenzo Dow Turner knew of this difficulty, but he showed that we might nevertheless be reasonably confident of the results when West African sources are compared across a span of two centuries or more. We will proceed with the understanding that the following consonant facts about major languages from the Atlantic coast and the Gulf of Guinea must be considered as

collective input to the primary phonological patterns which black slaves brought to their first encounter with English; these patterns were then levelled during the formation of a distinctive Black koiné, and then a lingua franca, in America.

We begin by considering the problem of consonant cluster simplification, with the straightforward statement by Peter Ladefoged that

> many West African languages, including most of the Kwa group [for our purposes this means Akan, Ewe, Efik, Yoruba, Igbo, Ijo, Isoko, Itsekire, Nupe, and Urhobo] can be considered to have no consonant clusters (1968: p. 1).

We may infer that this provides a strong historical basis for the deletion of one of a clustered pair of consonants in Black English. Ladefoged also gives an insight into the /θ/ > /f/, /θ/ > /t/, and /ð/ > /d/ substitutions in Black dialect: of 61 languages which he investigated in his A Phonetic Study of West African Languages (including all those inspected in this study except Kongo), only one--Sherbo in Sierra Leone--has a /θ/ or /ð/ in a systemic contrast. Ladefoged concludes that "dental fricatives are uncommon" in these languages, and we can see that they might be uncommon in early Black English.[9]

From the material in Elizabeth Dunstan's Twelve Nigerian Languages, and after an inspection of the sound systems of Wolof, Mende, (and Mandinka specifically), Akan, Ewe, and Kongo, we can conclude that the following consonant differences may have been involved in the formation of an early Black English koiné: the substitution of /b/ for /v/, which produced forms like "ebrey" and "lub," may have

come from languages without /v/--Wolof, Mandinka, Akan, Hausa, and Fula. The alternation between /r/ and /l/ which gave forms like "crose croset" might be traced to those languages which do not have an /l/, or which do not distinguish between /ɹ/ and /l/: Mende, Akan, Ewe, Kongo, Efik, Nupe, and Tiv. The replacement of word-final /ŋ/ with /n/ may have come from languages which do not contain /ŋ/, or which do not have a phonemic distinction between /ŋ/ and /n/: Twi, Hausa, Isoko, and Urhobo. In some cases, it might be true that r-loss may have been reinforced from languages without a retroflex /ɹ/: Efik, Ijo, and Yoruba. Forms like "shilde" and "shentiman" may have come from languages which have /š/ but not /ǰ/: Yoruba, Fula, and Itsekiri. When we consider, thus, the wide variety of languages which may have had some phonological influence on Early Black English, it is apparent that there is a giant matrix of West African sounds that was in the process of levelling in Black English well into the 18th century: of particular importance in the early dialect spellings are the /θ/-/f/ and /b/-/v/ alternations, and the /r/-/l/ and /ǰ/-/č/ as well. In such cases, we have evidence of a Black English koiné which differed substantially from the koiné that was formed in American white English.

Our next type of evidence in this scrutiny of consonants in Black English must draw upon the work of those phonologists who specialize in the history of Early Modern English: E. J. Dobson, Helge Kökeritz, Wilhelm Horn, and Martin Lehnert. In examining what they have to say, we will find Dobson particularly valuable for quoting

remarks in his sources on the origin and types of so-called "vulgar" pronunciation.[10]

The Early Modern English sources reveal that the voiceless spirant /θ/ seems to have had a close historical phonetic approximation to /f/: a Black English dialect pronunciation like "bof" may be foreshadowed in the Elizabethan rhyming of pairs like "wealth" and "yourself," and "youth" with "proof" (K, 296). Dobson terms this /θ/-/f/ alternation an example of "vulgar London" speech in the Early Modern English period (p. 948). As far as the pronunciation of "in" for an /ɪŋ/ ending is concerned, the historically based substitution of an alveolar for a velar nasal is well attested, and is explained by Dobson as developing from a "syntactic confusion of the verbal noun and the present participle" (p. 950). Dobson adds further, though, that "the nature of the evidence shows the vulgar and dialectal status of the pronunciation" (p. 951).

The facts about consonant loss also show that the dialect spellings have historical precedents in the speech of 16th and 17th century England. Intervocalic /v/ is absent in /gi:/ for "give," "ease" for "eaves," and in the regional pronunciations of "Densheer" for "Devonshire" and "Lerpool" for "Liverpool;" Dobson's source condemns this as "barbarous speaking" (p. 965). The vocalization of /ɹ/ finally and before consonants in modern British standard pronunciation is a phenomenon which can be dated to what Dobson terms "good speech" at around 1800; the absence of /ɹ/, however, in "vulgar pronunciation" (Dobson's term on page 914) is evidenced as early as the 1670s in such forms as "pennuth" for "pennyworth," and in such homophone pairs as

"patterns: pattens" and "pillars: pillows" (p. 408). Concerning the loss of /l/, it is apparent that a Black English pronunciation like "ki" for "kill" generalizes the environment of a rule deleting /l/ between back vowels and a consonant, a change which can be traced to the beginning of the 15th century (Dobson, p. 988). Some time later, in 1567, William Salesbury reported a regional dialect loss of /l/ "in some districts of England" in a form such as "bu" for "bull" (Dobson, p. 17).

The early evidence on consonant cluster simplification shows that starting in the late 14th century, /d/ and /t/ were dropped after /l/ and after the dentals /n/ and /s/: Dobson lists pronunciations like "husban" for "husband," "gess" for "guest," and "mole" for "mould" (p. 961). He calls the process of /d/ and /t/ loss "assimilatory," and notes that "it is shown only by sources that reflect vulgar speech." For Dobson, then, the evidence on this specific kind of consonant cluster simplification indicates that "it was apparently common in vulgar and dialectal speech but was resisted in careful educated speech" (p. 961).

The last type of consonant evidence is to be found in A Selected, Pronouncing and Accented Dictionary published in 1800 by two Americans, John Elliott and Samuel Johnson, Jr. These two, perhaps wincing for years over their encounters with the less fastidious of their countrymen, include in their dictionary a section on "Vulgar Errors in Pronunciation" (p. 16), in which they condemn lower class and rustic pronunciations, as well as such malapropisms as "bilorous"

for "bilious," "confishicate" for "confiscate," "fancical" for "fanciful," and "obstropolous" for "obstreporous." One cannot fail to notice, however, that many of the sounds of the black literary dialect and, as well, some of the types of consonant loss condemned as "vulgar" in 17th century England, were also proscribed in 18th century America. Elliott and Johnson warned against the types of consonant alternation found in "apotecary" for "apothecary," "cornish" and "nonplush" instead of "cornice" and "nonplus," "fardin" and "furder" instead of "farthing" and "further," and 'larnin" instead of "learning;" in addition, they disliked r-loss in such words as "cose" and "noath." In short, the list in Elliott and Johnson's dictionary shows that by 1800, lexicographers were keenly aware of what constituted basilect pronunciations in American English.

From a comparison of the dialect representations, the possible phonological sources from West African languages, and the evidence from the phonological history of Early Modern English in Britain and America, we gain an important perspective; many of the sound substitutions and usages to be found in the literary dialect had already been condemned as rustic or vulgar or barbarous by certain 17th century orthoepists in England. Among these forms which playwrights and novelists found to be peculiar and indeed characteristically "dialectal" for Black speakers, the substitution of /f/ for /θ/ and of /n/ for /ŋ/, the loss of /v/, of postvocalic or preconsonantal /r/, and of /l/, and consonant cluster simplification such that /d/ and /t/ were lost after a consonant, had all been condemned by the phonologists of the 1600s in England. Thus, even though out of respect for the current

Creolist hypothesis one may be reluctant to assert that there are direct historical traces between British English and American Black English, one nevertheless has to face the fact that Black English from the outset carried an historical burden: directly or indirectly certain of its sounds were understood to be low-class.

In addition to the lower class character of these forms, the black literary dialect of the era 1771-1836 stands sharply foregrounded when compared to the speech of the whites in these American plays and novels. The representations of white dialect show few examples of consonant alternation and loss, and little consonant cluster simplification. It is apparent that novelists and playwrights of this era chose only rarely to characterize the colloquial or fast speech forms in the white dialect;[11] indeed, the speakers of white dialect display a spelling pronunciation that seems to be informed by the prescriptive rules of John Walker and Thomas Sheridan, those experts on British pronunciation who were admired and followed by American grammarians of the time.[12]

It is quite likely that the American koiné discussed by Joey Lee Dillard was developing, at the beginning of the 19th century, a pronunciation standard which was modeled on the principles set forth by Walker and Sheridan. But it remains for linguists to recognize that from the outset those black dialect consonant rules which were on their way to forming what Labov terms a "covert norm"[13] were given a disproportionately heavy emphasis in literary dialect. The result for historians of Black dialect is that we must understand that the early writers were hypocritical in representing white speech and

hypercritical in representing black speech. There is thus a burdensome, two-fold legacy to be dealt with in our modern interpretations of black dialect: the attitude of some that black speech is low-class has been around longer than we may have realized, and early representations of Black dialect may well show an exaggerated and perhaps unfair contrast with the colloquial level of white speech.[14]

NOTES

[1]Turner quotes Professor Guy B. Johnson on p. 9. Writing in 1949, Turner speaks on p. 6 of George Philip Krapp's opinions in his "The English of the Negro" in the June, 1924 issue of the American Mercury. The most commonly quoted of Krapp's statements on the origin of Black English is to be found in Vol I, p. 251 of his English Language in America: the sounds of Negro dialect are "for the most part survivals of native English elements in the language."

[2]Turner quotes Johnson again on p. 9.

[3]Turner quotes Professor Mason Crum on p. 10.

[4]Turner quotes Crum again on p. 11.

[5]Dillard's phrase is on p. 83 of his Black English.

[6]Interestingly enough, the derivation of "chillen" from "children" can be reconstructed in English language terms. "Children" will have the medial /ld/ consonant cluster reduced to give "chil-ren;" metathesis of the /er/ sequence may have occurred (Dobson on p. 906 gives such examples as apron-apern and caudren-caudern) to give "chilern;" and preconsonantal /r/ may have dropped to give "chil(l)en."

[7]The difficulty in working with these eighteenth and early nineteenth century materials is that they are not as full and varied as those found in the later work of Joel Chandler Harris. In his analyses of Harris' phonology, Sumner Ives concerned himself both with the dialect sounds of the Uncle Remus stories and the problems of distinguishing literary dialect from eye dialect. In his remarks on the literary dialect in the monograph "The Phonology of the Uncle Remus Stories" (PADS, 1954), one can see that many of the early dialect spellings showing consonant alternation and loss still operate in the middle 1800's, the time of Harris' boyhood. Ives quotes examples from Harris to show, for instance, that there is initial devoicing of /t/ in "terreckly" (p. 38), that /d/ becomes /j/ in "jew" for "dew" (p. 44), that "dem" and "dar" can still represent "them" and "there" (p. 41), and that /θ/ was replaced finally by /f/ in a word like "fofe" (p. 45). Ives records that final /s/ was replaced by /š/ in "slice" (p. 48), that the final "ing" participle was given as /ɪn/ (p. 50), and that there was an intrusive /j/ in a word like "yelbow" (p. 50). Harris preserved the earlier representational habits not only with consonant alternations, however; in certain cases the same types of consonant loss, and all of the types of consonant cluster simplification also occur in the Uncle Remus stories. In the case of /r/-loss, Ives records forms like "blackbe'y"

and "suffun" (p. 49). He demonstrates that final /t/ is lost after /p/, /k/, /f/, /s/, and /n/ (p. 38), and that /d/ drops after /l/ and /n/ (p. 41). We also find that, as in the 18th century spellings, /k/ is dropped after /s/ in a word like "flas" for "flask" (p. 44), and that Uncle Remus retains the earlier pronunciations of "chillun" (p. 49). The fact that these representations are repeated in Harris' work attests to a fundamental real-life accuracy in the earlier spellings.

[8]These are the languages mentioned by David Dalby in his 1970 address "Black Through White: Patterns of Communication in Africa and the New World," p. 131. I have chosen to supplement these with the languages treated in Elizabeth Dunstan's Twelve Nigerian Languages because of the generally recognized importance of the slave trade in the Niger delta.

[9]Ladefoged, p. 27. This comes across as a remarkable understatement, considering the importance of this fact for modern Black English dialect.

[10]One of Dobson's favorite sources for such judgments is the orthoepist Christopher Cooper, whose often delivered opinion on such matters Dobson gives as "barbarous speaking" (from the Latin "facilitatis causa"--see Dobson, p. 966). In the citations following in the text, "Kökeritz" will be abbreviated with a "K" and "Dobson" with a "D."

[11]There is an attempt to portray Yankee dialect in "Jonathan Postfree."

[12]In 1780, Thomas Sheridan wrote in his A General Dictionary of the English Language that "a good articulation consists, in giving every letter in a syllable its due proportion of sound, according to the most approved custom of pronouncing it" (p. 38).

Walker, in his A Critical Pronouncing Dictionary and Expositor of the English Language, chose less to emphasize spelling pronunciation, and more to accept that usage found in a "compound ration" of "those sounds which are most generally received among the learned and polite as well as the bulk of speakers" (p. viii). The speech of blacks, it is unnecessary to add, was not a product of the schools ("the learned"), nor the court ("the polite"), nor of the majority dialect ("the bulk of speakers").

[13]In his Sociolinguistic Patterns (1972), Labov shows that covert norms "attribute positive values to the vernacular" (p. 249).

[14]A detailed look at these early sources thus confirms George Philip Krapp's contention (I, 248) that:

literary transcriptions of negro dialect are likely to approach more nearly to scientific exactness in the recording of the minuter details of the phonetic side of speech than other literary transcriptions of dialect ordinarily do, and thus to seem further removed from the familiar forms of standard speech. One hears the illiterate speech of negroes more illiterately than one hears the illiterate speech of one's fellow-whites.

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